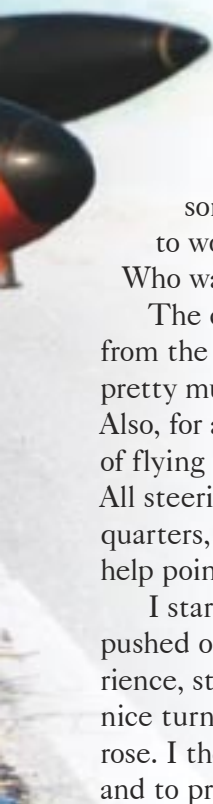


Offroad Incident

By LCdr. D. Allen Lamberson





There I stood, all proud of myself, having just completed my first solo in the mighty Buckeye. I was king of the world, or at least NAS Pensacola, where I was a student at VT-4. All of the instructor pilots were excited, as well, because students who had completed their solos now were “turn qualed.” This term meant I could start and taxi the airplanes for the contract-maintenance personnel, who maintained our jets.

I soon was presented with my first opportunity to excel. The phone rang in the ready room; maintenance needed someone to taxi a jet to the compass rose for some required maintenance. Several instructors were hanging around and immediately began giving all kinds of excuses to get out of doing the taxi. One of the instructors spied me trying to hide in the “geedunk.” I quickly was shooed out of the ready room and down to maintenance control.

I carefully looked over the book and met the maintainer who would ride in the back and talk me through the “compass swing.” The task didn’t sound too hard; since I wasn’t taking the plane flying, I didn’t have to sign anything. Off I went, secure in the knowledge that everything, including some recent brake work, had been done correctly, and I would be starting up a safe jet.

The checks, start-up and taxi out of the line were uneventful. The brakes felt a little different than what I was used to, but the mech checked them and reminded me some brake work just had been completed. “Not to worry,” he said, “they just need to be broken in.” Who was I to argue?

The compass rose at NAS Pensacola is a long taxi from the line, and everything that goes on over there is pretty much out of sight of VT-4 and the control tower. Also, for all of those who never have had the pleasure of flying the Buckeye, there is no nosewheel steering. All steering is done with brakes, or, sometimes in close quarters, a lineman will hookup a towbar to the nose to help point it in the right direction.

I started the right turn into the compass rose and pushed on the right brake, which, in my wealth of experience, still felt a little funny to me. The jet made a nice turn onto the short taxiway leading to the compass rose. I then pushed on the left brake to stop the turn and to proceed straight, but I was alarmed at a lack of

response. Naturally, I pushed harder on the left brake until it “hit the floor,” with no more travel to be had from the toe brakes.

The nose of my airplane continued through the centerline of the taxiway and now was pointing off the side and down a small slope. The mech in the back seat asked me what was going on. I honestly have no idea if I responded or not, but I clearly remember him calling, “Whoa! Whoa!” as we started through the grass.

I shut down both engines because we were departing a prepared surface and hung on for the ride. After what seemed like an eternity of bouncing and jostling about, I wound up on another taxiway. I again started pushing on the brakes, and the right brake seemed to catch; I stood on it with all my might. Although this effort made the jet spin around and around the right wheel, it thankfully kept us on the taxiway. Once everything came to a stop, the world went quiet.

I expected the fire trucks soon to show up. But, because I hadn’t made any transmissions on the radio, and I couldn’t see the control tower or the squadron from where I was, it seemed my bad situation was starting to get better. Nobody knew about my predicament.

The mech hopped out of the airplane and messed with the brakes. Whatever he did made both of the toe brakes feel much better. He suggested the brakes were “good enough” to get us back to the line. I started up the jet, uneventfully taxied back, shut down, and made some references to maintenance control that the brakes needed some more work. I then scurried off to find my buddies and to figure out what to do next.

They listened to my story with amazement. Because there was no damage to the jet, and nobody except me and the mech (and now a few of my fellow students) knew what had happened, they told me to keep my mouth shut (which I did).

All was well, and nobody said anything to me until my winging ceremony. The tradition at VT-4 is that all of your student buds write stories about you, which then are read by the CO while you are on stage getting your wings. When the skipper came to the part about my taking a T-2 offroad, he stopped reading, turned to me and asked what that was all about. I nervously mumbled something about him not really wanting to know, and that was the last mention ever of my offroad incident. 🦅

LCdr. Lamberson currently flies with VAW-77.